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Sterling Audio ST155, ST169 and ST170 review

By [Electronic Musician \(emusician\)](#) 21 days ago

Three new mics with pro features at an economical price



Sterling Audio's latest releases, the ST155 FET condenser, the ST169 multipattern tube condenser, and the ST170 ribbon microphone, were designed to handle common recording tasks while remaining affordable for musicians working in their own studios. Each model includes an aluminium flight-style case with plenty of padding on the inside, as well as a shock mount (which I'll cover in more detail in a moment).

ST155 \$199

The side-address ST155 is a Class A FET condenser with a fixed cardioid pattern, a -10 dB pad and a -12dB/octave highpass filter (see Figure 1). Sterling designed the ST155 as an all-around studio mic that can handle vocals, speech, and acoustic instruments, or get put into service as drum overheads or room mics: This mic will handle pretty much any sound source you might have. One reason the ST155 is so versatile is that it has a maximum SPL rating of 144 dB with the pad in, 134 dB without, in addition to its respectable frequency response and sensitivity specs.

I began testing the mic on a recording that included both 5-string banjo and acoustic guitar parts. The mic did a great job of translating the banjo's metallic tone and sounded better than some of my more expensive condensers in that application.

It also did a solid job on the acoustic guitar. I placed the mic in front of the 12th fret and the ST155 captured a bright and crisp sound. I was particularly impressed with how well it translated low, single-note runs on the acoustic. Those notes can sound a little splatty through some mics, but the ST155's transient response is quite good, resulting in notes that were clean and distinct. I subsequently tried it on several other acoustic guitar recordings with similar results.

I also used it on dobro, tambourine and mandolin. It recorded clean and accurate signals and was flattering on all those instruments. On vocals, it was crisp, clear, and full, and its sound was bright but not shrill. Additionally, the mic works well when recording spoken-word material.

ST169 \$499

Although it is the same size and shape as the ST155, the side-address ST169 is a tube mic that feels hefty and substantial. You can see its dual 1" capsules through the rigid mesh screens on the front, back and top of the microphone.

Using a three-way switch, you can choose one of three polar patterns, cardioid, omnidirectional and figure-8. And like the ST155, it includes a -10dB pad and a low-cut filter with a -12dB/octave slope and a corner frequency of 75 Hz. It has an impressive SPL rating of 142 dB with the pad engaged, and 132 dB without.

CLOSE X

I tested the ST169 on a variety of suitable sources—a male vocalist, a female vocalist, an acoustic guitar (a 20-year old Taylor 510), a dobro (a Beard square-neck wood-body model), and an Eastman F-style mandolin. In every case, it was connected to my DAW through the mic preamps on my RME Fireface 802 interface. Throughout, the ST169 yielded a sound that was bright and present (particularly on the dobro). Sterling doesn't publish the frequency diagram for the mic, but I'm pretty sure it would show a distinct presence boost.

The only downside with the ST169 was that it sounded almost a little too "tubey," with more crunchiness in the top end than I've heard in the more expensive tube mics I've used. It was also less full and clear in the bottom end. But for a multipattern tube mic at such an affordable price, the ST169 is a capable performer.

ST170 \$299

The ST170 is a sleek-looking ribbon mic with a figure-8 pattern and active circuitry that requires +48V phantom power. Consequently, it has a hotter output than a passive ribbon microphone and removes the issue of impedance matching, making the ST170 suitable for use with low-cost audio interfaces.

My first session with the ST170 involved using it to record an electric guitar cabinet, one of the applications for which ribbon mics are typically chosen. Sure enough, the ST170 delivered a warm, round image of the sound of the guitar amp, which sat well in the track.

Sterling also suggests using the ST170 to record vocals and acoustic guitars, and as an overhead drum mic. On an acoustic guitar, it gave the recording a lot of body, making it useful for heavy strumming parts. And as you would expect from a ribbon, it didn't capture the sparkly high-end that you get with a condenser mic. So, for fingerpicked or flat-picked single-note parts, it probably wouldn't be my first choice.

I also tried it on the dobro, an instrument with a lot of midrange, and the ST170 excelled in the application. Later, I recorded a dobro part using both the ST170 and the ST155, sending each microphone to its own track. When mixed, the combined result sounded massive. And when I tried the ST170 on male vocals, I was pleased with how rich and full the recording was.

The ST155 and ST169 include Sterling Audio's SM8 shock mount, which is large and feels well-built. The mic slides between suspended elastic elements and screws into a fastener at the bottom.

Sterling even includes spare elastic pieces in case yours loosen up over time. (And unlike some shock mounts that require extreme dexterity to restring, the SM8 looks as if it would be relatively easy to repair.) The only issue I had with the SM8 is that it can be difficult to unplug certain cables from it, because the metal ring that tightens the mic into the mount obstructs part of the cable's release tab.

Because the ST170 is considerably smaller in diameter than the other two mics, it comes with a different shock mount, the SM5. Rather than screwing into the mount like the SM8, this mic is held in place strictly from the pressure of its elastic bands. Nonetheless, the SM5 holds the ST170 (and similarly sized mics) snugly.

A sterling example

In my opinion, all of these mics are a good value for the money. Of the three, the ST155 and ST170 were my favorites.

The ST155 is exceptionally versatile and can handle almost any type of source, sounding excellent on some and very good on everything else. I was particularly impressed with its transient response. If you're looking for an affordable, all-around studio mic, The ST155 a solid choice.

With its modern design and active electronics, the ST170 is much more durable and usable in the personal studio than low-cost ribbon mics. While it can't sonically compare to transducers costing twice as much (or more), it is an affordable way to get that characteristically round tone that ribbon mics provide. And depending on the sound source and mic placement, the ST170 will give you impressive results.

The ST169 provides plenty of distinctive tubemic warmth, though a little too much in some cases. But with three polar patterns available, as well as its pad and low-cut filter, the ST169 is a versatile mic and an affordable entry point into the world of tube microphones.

Strengths

ST155 cleanly handles transients and is versatile. ST170 has active circuitry, high output and greater preamp compatibility. ST169 offers tube-mic sound at a budget price. Cases and shock mounts included.

Limitations

ST169 can sound a little crunchy. Detaching mic cables from the SM8 shock mount is sometimes difficult.

ST155 \$199

ST169 \$499

ST170 \$299

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